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ABSTRACT

Recommendations for improving communications skills are offered. It is stated that the process of communicating involves passing information and understanding from one person to another; a one-way process of sending out information is not good enough. To help principals communicate more effectively with their staff, recommendations are offered on the following topics: (1) improving listening skills; (2) making sure that the message is getting through to the other person; and (3) deciding whether to use oral or written communication. A list of reasons why misunderstandings occur is also included. (DC)

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How to Communicate Effectively with Staff Members

Tips for Principals from NASSP

September 1983

Written by Shirley Boes Neill

Tips for Principals from NASSP September 1983

How To Communicate Effectively With Staff Members

Have these things ever happened to you?

—You call a meeting to inform staff members about a new directive from the central office. Your explanation is clear—or so you think—but the questions from staff members indicate the opposite.

—You ask Viola Willow, a department head, to suggest the names of several teachers for a special staff development series being organized by the central office. You wait and wait, and finally summon her to your office. She reminds you that she asked you to consider an alternative approach that she's been working on with other staff. You forgot; you're embarrassed.

—Following a required evaluation visit to Fred Smith's classroom, you offer several suggestions for reducing student distractions. Smith's classroom is equally chaotic on your next visit, and he appears to be ignoring your suggestions. You repeat them, but you feel he's not listening.

—You announce a new open-door policy and encourage staff members to share good *and* bad news with you. Few come; even fewer level with you about their problems.

If you have failed to get the results you expected in situations such as these, you might conclude, rightfully, that something is wrong. That something could be your communications skills.

What Can You Do?

First, it's necessary to understand the not-so-fine line that separates effective from ineffective communicators. You could fall into the latter category if you define communications as "telling people what you think."

Those who communicate successfully would more likely follow the definition provided by Lester R. Bittel in *What Every Supervisor Should Know*. He says communications is "the process in human relations of passing information and understanding from one person to another."

Simply passing out information isn't good enough. Yet, the experts say, most bosses are most familiar and comfortable with a one-way process of sending out information.

To improve communications to the extent that listeners actually stay tuned in to your message *and* act upon it, you have to change the process. You must not only talk, but listen to employees and provide channels for them to relate their needs, desires, reactions, and problems.

Some experts boil communications down to these essentials: prepare a clear message, send it, make sure it is received, make sure it is understood.

Where Do You Start?

Perhaps the golden rule of communications should be this: Listen to other persons the way you want them to listen to you—with full attention, without jumping to conclusions, without interrupting, with courtesy.

If you can't wait for another person to finish what he or she has to say, you're probably missing a lot that could help you communicate better.

Take, again, the case of Fred Smith. If you constantly interrupt during Smith's explanation of why he hasn't followed your suggestions, he may give up trying to tell you anything.

If you announce an open-door policy, but employees find out that the only news you want to hear is "good" news, that may be all you will hear. They won't stop in to talk over problems that might upset you.

Experts offer these tips for improving your listening skills:

- Listen for the main ideas; don't get lost in the details or distracted by sub-points.
- Make the speaker feel comfortable. A teacher may feel more at ease during a post-evaluation conference in his or her own classroom than in your office.
- Don't assume anything. Wait for the other person to finish before drawing conclusions.
- Ask relevant and clarifying questions (e.g., "Are you saying that...").
- Straighten out any facts you know to be wrong, but do so without gloating.
- Once a meeting is started, don't take or place phone calls (except in an emergency), see other visitors, or finish work on your desk.
- Ask for clarification if you don't understand what the other person is saying.

A Word from the Wise

Your actions are, of course, much more important than what you say or how you say it. As Mark Twain observed: "Thunder is good, thunder is impressive; but it is lightning that does the work."

What if you are a good listener, but the person you are talking with is not? Make sure you state your message directly and in a short-winded way.

Are You Getting Through?

You can be sure you're getting through by using old classroom tricks:

- Watch for give-away looks: puzzlement, distress, blank stares.
- Encourage questions.
- Have the other person repeat or rephrase what you've said.

You will, of course, have to tailor your approach to the person with whom you are talking. If you know that certain words will make a person see red, don't use them—unless you are ready for fireworks.

Be honest. If you make 180 degree turns in what you tell employees from one day to the next, they'll turn you off. If you change your mind on something, admit it. You could say, "Did I say that yesterday? I was wrong yesterday, and I don't mind saying it. I've had a chance to think it over."

Stick to the facts. Suppose a dependable, hard-working teacher asks for time off. You'd like to grant the request, but doing so will probably bring forth charges of favoritism from other employees. What do you do?

One management expert suggests that you say something like this: "Let's look at the contract and see what it says about this matter." That's much better, he says, than blurting out, "You should know better than to ask me that; you know I can't let you do it."

In stressful situations, try to keep your tone objective, not emotional. Otherwise, the other person may note your pitch and intensity, but not your words. Be mindful that you can put another person on his or her guard by the way you say, "I want to talk with you."

In general, you've probably communicated well if employees follow through on your directions or suggestions.

Why Do Misunderstandings Occur?

In *Communication for Supervisors and Managers*, Lyle Sussman and Paul D. Krivonos say persons with the best intentions can, nevertheless, misunderstand each other when:

- Messages are overgeneralized.
- Jargon or abstract terms are used.
- Messages contain conclusions that are based on limited information or data.
- At least one party isn't listening.
- Messages intentionally or unintentionally "obfuscate" meaning. "Using $50 words like obfuscate can make us feel educated and intellectual," Sussman and Krivonos say, "but unless your receivers know the $50 words, they may confuse obfuscate with some other word."

Should You Talk It Over or Write It Down?

There's no definite answer to that question. Sometimes oral communication is best; with some individuals and groups and in some circumstances, written communication is best.

Both may be needed as reinforcers, one for the other. You would use both forms of communication, for example, if your high school adopted new graduation requirements. You would need to distribute a statement of the requirements and also explain them verbally to staff, students, and parents.

Similarly, in conducting a post-evaluation conference with a teacher, you will want to talk over improvement targets before putting them in writing for further reference.

Oral messages are preferable, according to Sussman and Krivonos, if time is important, feedback is crucial, or your message must result in acceptance.

If the receiver of the message is expected to be held accountable for performance, then a written message is superior to an oral one.

"Relying too heavily on the written word can be disastrous, as can be the requirement to 'put it in writing,' " says Walter St. John in *Personnel Journal*. He believes that communicating face-to-face is usually best.

Two additional tips from Sussman and Krivonos may be helpful:

Bulletin boards. If you use a bulletin board to communicate with staff, you should decide if all kinds of messages can be put there. If so, people may or may not read it. If you allow only important messages to appear, they will be read.

Lengthy documents. If you must communicate a lot of information at one time, summarize it. Tell readers they can inspect the lengthy explanations at their leisure.

Written by Shirley Boes Neill

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